

Stay Safe in the Garden

by Phyllis Pugnetti

At first glance, an article about garden safety seems unnecessary. After all, Martha Stewart gardens in a stylish dress, with white gloves and shoes. How dangerous can it be? Worse than you think. Every year 143,000 Americans are admitted to emergency rooms for yard and garden related injuries—100 result in death. Most garden accidents are a result of poor planning and poor choices. Luckily, most can be avoided.

The most common of all garden injuries happen from falling off a ladder. A fall from two and a half times your height is fatal 50% of the time. So, ladder safety is very important, but often overlooked. Ladders in the yard are especially dangerous because they may be on uneven ground. Be sure the footing of the ladder is stable before you climb. Avoid the top two steps. But most important, always have someone hold the ladder for more stability. Don't decide to skip this step just because you're impatient to get the job done.

If you take a serious tumble in the yard, what will you fall on—lawn, rocks, concrete, rose bushes? How long will you lay there before help arrives, hours or days? If you are working on a risky job, or maybe you're not as steady on your feet as you used to be, consider gardening with a buddy. If that's not possible call a friend to let them know what you'll be doing and how long it should take. Let them know that you'll call back when you're done. That way if they don't hear from you in the allotted time, they can check on you. It may sound like overkill, but falls are the leading cause of fatal injuries in people over 65. A garden buddy could save your life.

Pruners, loppers, small saws, and sharp knives make quick work of pruning shrubs and small trees. It's easy to get so focused on completing a task that you lose sight of where your fingers are. Many gardeners have suffered deep cuts or lost part of their finger because they were inattentive. Wearing leather gloves is wise but nothing substitutes for caution.

Cuts and puncture wounds, even minor ones are more likely to get infected when they occur in the garden. Insects that visit plants can leave behind lots of bacteria. Rose thorns are notorious for serious bacterial infections. There are a billion bacteria in just one teaspoon of compost. While bacteria does amazing things for your garden, it's not so good when a small cut lets it get inside of you! Wounds from sharp tools, skinny brittle branches, and thorny bushes have earned many a gardener an extended hospital stay and IV antibiotics. Wearing sturdy shoes and gloves, shirts with long sleeves, and long pants will prevent most minor skin injuries.



Another common injury happens when staking up small plants like peppers or harvesting fruits from staked plants. You're focused on the task and bend down, but don't see the stake until you cut your face or eye. This

can cause serious puncture wounds. Some people mark stakes by piercing old tennis balls and sticking them on top of the stake. Another solution is to stake plants to arched wires or round cages. The curved shape makes it unlikely to puncture your eyes or face.

Avid gardeners frequently find themselves pushing to complete a task, thinking for just a few more minutes. But of course, it turns into a couple hours. This can lead to dehydration and heat exhaustion. Symptoms include nausea, muscle aches, dizziness, and confusion, which can be dangerous while handling sharp tools. Try to keep water with you, work in the cool morning hours, and take frequent breaks.

If you worry about bee or wasp stings, know that most don't fly while it's raining, cold, or dark. They are most active when the outside temperature is between 70° and 90°. So your garden will be almost bee and wasp free in the early morning and again in the late afternoon as dusk nears. Bees and wasps have little interest in you and will rarely sting unless they feel threatened. However, wasps very aggressively defend their nest and food sources. Play it safe and remove nests that are near doors, pathways, barbeque areas, and other areas where people gather. Once you understand when and why they sting, it's pretty easy to avoid bees and wasps.

Garden injuries are common, yet most can be prevented. With a little information and a lot of caution you can stay safe out there!

For any gardening questions - you are always welcome to contact our Master Gardener Clinic at 509-574-1604 or email gardener@co.yakima.wa.us.